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**A study of Buddhist sculptures found
in Rakhine old Dhanyawaddy city
compared with in Indian old Buddhist
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by

Tun Shwe Khine (M.A)

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Abstract

Ancient *Rakhine* Capital's geographical unique position on the Bay of Bengal with both land and sea routes to the India resulted early in the development at political and cultural traits which later emerged in other centres in Southeast Asia. There are stone inscriptions, coins; Buddha images and cultural handicrafts, which are earliest ones in Southeast Asia. In particular, city walls, moats, palace sites, etc, which all remain until now any one can be traced to the development of ancient *Rakhine* cities.

Preface

Rakhine region is situated at the junction of all three strategic regions, South Asia, East Asia and Southeast Asia. In addition to its strategic location especially India, source of ancient culture, is to its north and west, and Bay of Bengal, where the early sea route trade was originated, is to its south, and these connections gave it to the ancient urbanized settlement in the region. Such a geographical unique position led to the evolution and development of states in the *Rakhine* region.

In addition, such geographical aspects as falling in the direction of monsoon and being surrounded by the *Rakhine* mountain range result in sufficient rainfall, abundant river and creeks, rich soil and enough for continuous throughout the years.

Being surrounded by the *Rakhine* mountain range to the east causes sufficient rainfall on the one hand, and freed the ancient *Rakhine* cities from the invasion of contemporary *Pyu* cities, thus leading to their peaceful and stable development.

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Finally, the unique situation at the ancient *Rakhine* cities can be found to have conditioned their development.

Selagiri Tradition

On the right bank of *Gacehabbanaddy (Kaladam river)*, opposite *Kyauktaw* town, is the famous *Selagiri* hill in the *Rakhine* history. It is highly venerated by the *Rakhine* nations. According to the tradition, *Gautama* Buddha Journeyed to *Rakhine* with his five hundred disciples and rested on the summit of this hill. At this site Buddha held a prophetic discourse on the previous existences during which He dwelled in *Rakhine*. On the top of the hill, Buddha pointed out to his disciples the various sites in which his former lives had been passed. This hill commanded a view of the rice plains towards *Dhanyawaddy* ancient city which is situated about 5 miles east of the hill.

This pose symbolizes the first preaching of the law by the *Gautame* Buddha at *Sarnath*. Buddha preached his first sermon at the bounds of *Benares* city in a park then known as the Deer Park (*Migadarwontaw*). There he met his five former companions. These five companions were his former disciples who had left him when he gave up the austerities. To these five former disciples he preached his first sermon thus setting in motion the wheel of the law.¹

We have found one relief sculpture in *Dhanmacakra mudra* from the base of *Selagiri* hill in 1923. A.D. and found a two line Sanskrit inscription, later identified as the Buddhist creed, in a script closely related to Bengal epigraphs of the 5th – 6th centuries AD.

The first relief was recorded by the French archaeologist *Deroiselle* in 1924 AD. It may be a part of old pagoda. The sculpture was made of the red sandstone and it measures 0.6 m, high, 0.4 m across and is 0.14 m in depth.² Buddha sits, hands in the gesture of turning the wheel of the law *Dhanmacakra mudra*. His right knee slightly raised in an asana unique in Buddhist art.

¹ San Tha Aung, The Buddhist Art of Ancient Rakhine. P1-71

² Report of the Sup, Archaeological Survey of Burma (ASB) 1924, plv and, PP.44-45, Arch, Neg.2694

The Buddha sits on an undecorated hexagonal raised seat. The sculpture had masterfully done the carving of this piece of art. The landscape background and positioning of the human figures give us an admirable three dimensional effect.

The Buddha Image has an elliptical undecorated *holo (prabhavali)* behind his head. It is obvious different between *Rakhine* and Gupta Buddhist Art. In Gupta style, *prabhavali* is always decorated with various fine ornaments. The spiral knots of the curly hair, which appear from a distance as small circles are in rows. The rows are curved slightly down-wards above the forehead. These spiral knots of hair one in the type of *Mathura Buddhas*. But the curving at the rows slightly down-wards above the forehead one similar to *Sarnath Buddhas*.

The facial features are not Indian. The nose is prominent and the lips are full, perhaps reflecting local physiognomy.

The eyes are downcast. The ear lobes are large but do not touch the shoulder. The neck has the three graceful folds (*Trivali*). The right shoulder is bare. The upper garment *uttrasanga* can be seen over the left shoulder, very similar to its depiction in many *Kurkihar bronges* and at *Dvarawaddy*. The lower garment (*antaravasaka*) is apparent from the waist. The robe itself, depicted as thin and clinging to the body, reflects the idealizing nature of the classical Indian Gupta and post-Gupta styles.¹

The figure at the Buddha's feet is seated in a natural manner, legs loosely crossed with the knees raised, his left hand reaching to the right upper arm. It is royal figure sitting at ease on the ground listening to what Buddha's says. The headdress of this figure consists of a lower diadem and three receding tiers. The headdress is decorated all around with a floral motif.

His smile indicates that he is pleased with what he hears.

Some curls of hair can be seen protruding under the headdress in the Gupta manners. He also has prominent features. His eyes are also downcast. The ear lobes are extended because of his heavy earrings which fall below the shoulders. His

¹ P.Gutman, Ancient Arakan, Australian National University, 1996, Vol (1), PP. 80-81, Vol (11). P-105

ornaments are those usually associated with royalty; jeweled necklace, upper armbands and belt.

In the *Rakhine* tradition, Buddha came to *Rakhine* and stopped at the *Selagiri* hill King *Canda Surira of Dhanyawaddy* whose city was only five mile east of the hill, came to *Selagiri* hill to meet the Buddha. Buddha preached the *dhanmacakra* sermon to the king and became Buddhist.¹

The Enlightenment

In 1986, a *further* five similar *reliefs* were discovered on the southern side of *Selagiri* hill close to *Duroiselle's* earlier discovery, the *reliefs*, which are identical in materials, style and size, each 2" high, 1.6" in width. Now, they are kept at the museum at the *Mahamuni* shrine. These *reliefs* are depicted with detail fine sculpture and made of red sand stone.

The first relief depicting the Enlightenment have the Buddha seated in *padmasana* (ပဒုမ္မသန) right leg over left and soles facing upwards in the old North Indian style.² Buddha image seated under the *mahabodi tree*. (မဟာဗောဓိညောင်ဝဋ်) The Buddha image has an elliptical halo behind his head. The left hand rests on the lap with palm upward and right palm down resting on the right knee and touching the seat or ground below. This *mudra* illustrate the Buddha's attitude of calling the earth goddess to witness his victory over Mara. This *mudra* is called *Bhumisparsa mudra*. The Enlightenment relief is depicted in the centre of the eight scenes of the life of Buddha which became popular later in Myanmar, following the Pala precedent.³

¹ Tún Shwe Khine. A Guide to Mrauk-U, Rakhine

² Debala Mitra Buddhist Monuments, (calcutta) 1971, P. 88

³ Gutman, A series of Buddhist Reliefs from Selagiri, 4, p-105

Buddha in Preaching Style

The sculpture is a scene in which Buddha seems to be preaching to one of his converts, possibly a hermit accompanied by a Buddhist monk.

This Buddha image has an elliptical halo (*prabhavali*) behind his head but not obvious. The Buddha seated on a undecorated rectangular seat with the feet placed on a lotus pedestal flanked by two deer indicating that the scene represents the first *sermon*. The Buddha's legs rest down below.

The hair style has rows of wavy knots of the curly hair. It is an old style at *Sarnath* and *Mathura*. The rows above the forehead are curved slightly downwards and only a small cranial protuberance (*unisa*) is noticed.

The slight downward curving of the rows above the forehead are similar to those of *Sarnath* style. But the facial features are not like Indians. The facial expressions, such as finely-etched eye brows almost meeting at the centre, down cast eyes or meditative eyes, prominent nose, and full lips might be the characteristics of a *Rakhine* national of Myanmar.

Perfect happiness or compassionate smile appears on the face of the Buddha image for having a chance of preaching to some of his fresh converts.

The ear lobes are outstanding and touching the shoulders. The monastic garments typical style of the *Sarnath* school cling simply over the body. In this figure, the right shoulder is bare. The upper garment (*uttrasanga*) falls gracefully forward over the left shoulder and left arm and an *antarnavasaka* is apparent at the waist exposing the knee. But the garments are not expressed elsewhere over the body as in the *Sarnath* style.¹

On both sides of the pedestal below the Buddha image are two human figures kneeling in prayers and listening to what Buddha says. The figures on the right is

possibly an adoring monk and the other figure on the left may be a hermit probably on account of his long beard and long hair.

This posture at Buddha image and some other attendant figures such as a monk, a hermit and two deer cause me to recall the *Yedhamma verse* (ယေဓမ္မဂါထာ) and its background tradition.

After having attained the Enlightenment at *Bodhagaya*, *Gautama*, now a Buddha, went to the Deer Park မိဂဒါဝုဏ် (Mrigadava) at *Sarnath*, near *Benares* (ဗာရာဏသီ) and preached His First Sermon, *Dhammacakra*, to the five ascetics who were His former companions. These five ascetics became His first disciples.¹

Buddha then proceeded to *Rajagriha* where King *Bimbisara* မိန္ဒသိဇ္ဇာ gave him park known as the *Bamboo grove* (*Wailuwun Vithaya*). Buddha converted many other ascetics. While Buddha and His disciples were sojourning there, a remarkable incident occurred. *Assaji*, the youngest of the five disciples, went into the city of *Rajagriha* (ရာဇဂြိုဟ်) with his alms-bowl, where he met an ascetic. His name was *Upatisya* who later became *Shin Sariputta* (သျှင်သာရိပုတ္တရာ), one of the chief disciples of *Buddha*. *Upatisya* (ဥပတိဿ), a hermit, was greatly impressed by *Assaji's* dignity and composure and followed him to ask who his teacher was and what his teachings were. *Assaji* replied that his teacher was Gotama Buddha, but he could not explain the *Buddha's* teachings very well because of his being newly ordained. The eager *Upatisya*, however, insisted *Assaji* to tell him a little of what he knew. At last *Assaji* complied by reciting the *Yedhamma* verse. On hearing the verse *Upatisya* became a Buddhist monk and later became one of the chief disciples with the name of *Sariputta*.

This stone slab is a representation of a scene of Buddha's preaching to one of his converts and of fine artistic workmanship. Above the unornamented *prabhavali* is a tree, identical to those of the Enlightenment *reliefs*. We can find a parallel in the

¹ W. Zwart, *Buddhism, Art and Faith*, 1985, P.37,

sixth century art of *Ajanta*, India. By looking at the sitting posture, the garment and head headdress, it should be dated between 4th and 8th century A.D.

The Artistic Workmanship of Buddha's Death Scene

Now I am going to present another stone slab. This is the *mahaparinirvana* scene showing Buddha's dying posture which is the last one of the four (4) principal incidents of the Master's life. In the upper portion, Buddha reclines underneath the *Ingjin trees (sal trees)* before His death. But there is no sign of grief on His face for dying, and He uttered His last Dharma and dying wishes to His disciples.

Buddha and His disciples had traveled far and wide and converted many people to Buddhism on their way. He had many disciples and most of the inhabitants at various countries and city-states such as *Varanasi, Kapilavastu, Stravasti*, and *Rajagriha* became Buddha and His *Sanghas*. For about forty five years, Buddha and His *sanghas* traveled from place to place preaching to people from all walks of life and He reached His eightieth year. Then He was at *Pava near Vaisali* during the rainy season. Buddha had a meal at a goldsmith's house where He ate rice and a well prepared dish containing pork. After the His illness He walked on to *Kusinagara (modern Kasia)* and laid down between two sal trees. When Buddha was suffering from the effects of the pork meal, He became very thirsty and asked *Nyidaw Ananda* three times for water. Buddha asked *Nyidaw Ananda* not to weep. As a matter of fact, all the disciples grieved over their Blessed One's dying. They tried their best to save Buddha's life and they called in the most well known physician နီဝက (Ziwaka) of the time and asked him to cure the Buddha's illness.

Then Buddha asked if anyone had any more questions; when there were none, Buddha passed through trance and died (*parinirvana*) (ပရိနိဗ္ဗာန်).

In the bas-relief sculpture, there are three human figures under reclining Buddha the central figure should be *Nyidaw Ananda* who seems to be grieving. On

the left seems to be a physician (*Ziwaka*) who is preparing medicine. The figure on the lower right could be *Subhadha*, the Buddha's last convert.

This is perhaps the first surviving rendition of the *parinirvana* in Myanmar. The scene appears only rarely in the art of *Sriksetra*, as a formal rendition at the apex of votive plaques illustrating the eight scenes of the Buddha's life.

The Bodhisattva

The last relief sculpture is also enigmatic and has masterfully done the carving of the piece of art. He also has prominent feature. A crowned male standing on an undecorated round base. Both arms are broken above the elbows. The headdress is decorated all around with a floral motif. Some curls of hair can be seen protruding under the headdress. His eyes are also prominent. The ear lobes are extended because of his heavy earring which fall below the shoulders. He wears a *Jewelled* necklace and the headdress style may be used to determine the date of these reliefs. The crown and the ornaments are very similar to previous relief of *Selagiri, Kyauktaw*. The plain *prabhavali* behind the head indicates divinity, and this together with the royal ornaments suggests that the figure may be a Bodhisattva.

The facial expression, contemplative and with a serene expression, recalls the well-known *Srivizayan Buddhisttva* found at *ehaiya* in the National Museum in Bangkok.

A comparison study with a bronze image of *Vajrapani in the Nalanda Museum*, date to the late eighth century AD, reveals remarkable iconographic similarities.

Conclusion

Finally, as we have studied, the *Selagiri* sculptures appear to ultimately derive from the classical Gupta tradition, and similarities with the art of *Ajanta* especially, bear this out. While the Buddha figures continue this tradition, *iconographically* and *stylistically* there are strong links with the later Buddhist art of *Northeast India*. *Iconographically*, the Enlightenment scenes, with the Buddha seated in *padmasana* rather than the *virasana* preferred in the south, show an east Indian connection. The

gogiconohically, the Enlightenment scenes, with the Buddha seated in *padmasana* rather than the *virasana* preferred in the south, show an east Indian connection. The rendition of the robe, especially the lappet over the left shoulder, shows a connection with Buddhist practice east the schools at *Kurkihar* and *Nalanda*, as well as *Dvarawaddy* to the east. The *Boddhisttva* image has been shown to have an iconographic connection with *Nalanda*.

Although the Buddhist sculptures of *Salagiri* are closely influenced by the Buddhist Arts of India, they are based and developed appropriately with local *Rakhine* tradition and local Buddhist arts. Our *Rakhine* generation, *Laymyo* and *Myauk- U dynasty* are developed with own style of Buddhist Art.

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၁၉၉၁-ရခိုင်မဟာမုနိဘုရားသမိုင်း၊ ခွင့်ပြု-(၈၈/၉၀) (၁၀) ကင်း (၁၇)

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1. The First Sermon Dharmacakra mudra

Sanstone, Selagiri Hill, Dyanyawaddy, Rakhine

5th century AD.



2. The Enlightenment of Buddha

Sanstone, Selagiri Hill, Dyanyawaddy, Rakhine

5th century AD



3. Buddha Preaching

Sanstone, Selagiri Hill, Dyanyawaddy, Rakhine



5. The King, Upasaka

Sanstone, Selagiri Hill, Dyanyawaddy, Rakhine

5th century AD



The First Cermon
Easten India Sarnth. 8th century



The highly venerated Mahamuni Buddha Image.



Buddha Preaching
Easten India Sarnth. 5th century AD



Buddha Preaching
Gandhara 2nd – 3rd century AD



The First Sermon

Gandhara 2ⁿ^h-3rd century AD



Buddha's head
Java, Borobudur. 9th century AD

265

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